

Scorched Supper on New Niger

SUZY McKEE CHARNAS

Bob W. Netchkay wanted my ship and I was damned if I was going to let him have it.

It was the last of the Steinway space fleet that my sister Nita and I had inherited from our aunt Juno. Aunt Juno had been a great tough lady of the old days and one hell of an administrator, far better alone than us two Steinway sisters together. I was young when she died, but smart enough to know that I was a hell of a pilot, so I hired an administrator to run the line for Nita and me.

Bob Netchkay administrated himself a large chunk of our income, made a bunch of deliberately bad deals, and secretly bought up all my outstanding notes after a disastrous trading season. I threw him out, but he walked away with six of my ships. I lost nine more on my own. Then my sister Nita married the bastard and took away with her all the remaining ships but one, my ship, the *Sealyham Eggbeater*.

And I'd mortgaged that to raise money for a high risk, high profit cargo in hopes of making a killing. But there were delays on Droslo, repairs to be made at Coyote Station, and the upshot was that Bob had gotten his hands on my mortgage. Now he was exercising his rights under it to call it early, while I was still racing for the one nearby dealer not trade-treated to my competitors. His message was waiting for me when I woke that morning someplace between Rico and the Touchgate system.

Ripotee had checked in the message for me. He sat on the console chewing imaginary burrs out from between his paw pads. No comment from him. He was probably in one of those moods in which he seemed to feel that the best way to preserve his catlike air of mystery was keeping his mouth shut and acting felinely aloof.

I read my message, smacked the console, and bounced around the cabin yelling and hugging my hand. Then I said, "This is short range, from 'The Steinway Legal Department,' which means that creep Rily

following my jig course already. If I was starting to pick him up, he would be picking me up too, first in signals and then in reality.

Among the instruments that gave the walls their baroque look of overdone detail I had stuck a snapshot of a New Nigerian captain I had encountered once, closely. What were the chances that somebody down there would know where Barnabas was these days? It would make a difference to know that I had one friend on New Niger.

My console jumped on, and there was a splintery image of Bob Netchkay's swarthy, handsome face. He looked grave and concerned, which made me fairly pant with hatred.

"You got my offer, Dee," he said in a honey voice.

If I turned off again he would think I was too upset to deal with him. I looked him in the eye and did not smile.

"Did you?" he pressed. He faced me full on, obscuring the predatory thrust of his beaky features.

"I know all about this final stage of your grab project, yes," I said.

He shook his head. "No, Dee, you don't understand. I'm thinking about the family now." He had changed his name to Steinway on marrying Nita, which was good for business but bad for my blood pressure. "I've talked this over with Nita and she agrees; the only way to handle it right is together, as a family."

I said, "I have no family."

Nita came and looked over his shoulder at me, her round, tanned face reproachful. I almost gagged: Nita, charter member of the New Lambchop League, sweet and slinky and one pace behind "her" man, pretending she knew nothing about business. She had dumped me as a partner for this ambitious buccaneer because he **would** play along with her frills and her **protect-me-I'm-weak** line. I **think** Aunt Juno had hoped to lead her in another direction by leaving half of the Steinway fleet to her. But Nita was part of the new swing back to "romance," a little lost lambchop, not an admiral of the spaceways.

"We're still sisters, Dee." She blinked her black eyes at me under her naked brows. She had undergone face stiffening years ago to create the supposedly alluring effect of enormous, liquid orbs in a mysterious mask.

"You may be somebody's sister," I snapped. "I'm not."

She whispered something to Bob.

He nodded. "I know. You see how bad things have gotten, Dee, when you get into a worse temper than ever at the sight of your own sister. Sometimes I think it's a chemical imbalance, that temper of

yours, it's not natural. Nita has to go, she's got things to do. I just wanted you to know that anything I suggest has already been run past her, and she's in complete agreement. Isn't that right, Nita?"

Nita nodded, fluttered her tapered fingers in my direction, and whisked her svelte, body-suited figure out of the picture. Where she had been I saw something I recognized behind Bob's shoulder: one of those stretched guts from the Wallies of Tchan that's supposed to show images of the future if you expose it to anti-gravity. It had never shown Aunt Juno these two connivers running her flagship.

"Well?" I said. I sipped the cold dregs of my ersatz.

Bob lowered sincerely at me. "Look, Dee, I'm older than you and a lot more experienced at a lot of things, like running a successful trade business. And I'm very concerned about the future of the Steinway name. You and I have been at odds for a long time, but you don't really think I've gone to all this trouble just to junk the line, do you? I did what I had to do, that's all."

He stopped and glared past me; I turned. Ripotee had a hind foot stuck up in the air and was licking his crotch. He paused to say loudly, "I'm doing what I have to do, too."

"Get that filth off the console!" Bob yelled. I chortled. He got control of himself and plowed on: "Already I've restored your family's reputation; Steinway is once again a name held in commercial respect. And I can do more."

"You don't realize; things are going to get rougher than you can imagine, and it won't be any game for a freelance woman with nobody to back her up. Look around you: times are changing, it's a tougher and tougher short haul market, and women are pulling back into softer, older ways. What will you be out there, one of a handful of female freaks left over from the days of Juno and her type? Freaks don't get work, not when there are good, sound men around to take it away from them. You'll be a pauper."

"I don't want that. Nita doesn't want it. You don't want it. Give up and face facts."

He paused, the picture of a man carried away by his own eloquence. And a pleasure to look at too, if I hadn't been burning up with loathing for his very tripes. Even without the frame of curling black hair and high collar, the subtly padded shoulders and chest—the New Lambchops weren't the only ones looking back in time to more romantic eras—Bob was handsome, and very masculine looking in a hard, sharp-cut way.

He knew it and used it, posing there all earnest drama, to give me

a minute to react, to cue him as to how all this was setting with me. I said, deadpan, "What's the deal?"

He looked pained. "Not a deal; a way for us all to come out all right. You give me the *Sealyham Eggbeater*, pull out of the business, take a holiday someplace, grow out your hair. In exchange for your ship, I'll give you a one-third inalienable interest in the Steinway stock and a nice desk job for income. But I get to run things my own way without interference. You keep your mouth shut and let me do what I know how to do, and I take care of you and your sister."

I was so mad I could hardly work my jaw loose enough to utter a sound. "But I don't get to do what I know how to do, which is to pilot a short haul ship. My answer is no."

I wiped the console and punched a new jig. Then I plugged in a tingle of electracalm and a light dose of antistress because I needed my head clear.

Ripotee lay stretched out along the sill of a viewport, curved within its curve, one paw hanging down. He liked to keep his distance when I was upset. His sapphire eyes rested on me, intent, unreadable. He had either found that he could not or decided that he would not learn to use his facial muscles for expressiveness on the human model. I couldn't interpret that masked, blunt-muzzled visage.

I said, "Ripotee, what do you know about New Niger?"

His tail started swinging, lashing. That was something he had never been able to control. He was excited, onto something.

"Jungle," he said. "Tall trees and vines and close underbrush. Good smells, earth and voidings and growth. Not like here."

"You've got cabin fever," I snorted. I was already setting up a fast but indirect course for Singlet, New Niger's main port. "Aren't your mice entertaining you enough anymore?"

I reached out to pat his head, but he jerked away. He didn't say, Don't do that, though he could have. Sometimes he was pleased to show me the superfluity of that human invention, speech. We had been in space a longish while. Ripotee got just as irritable as anyone else—as me.

The autodrives took over at full speed on a wild zigzag course. Strapping in tight, I signaled Ripotee, over the shout of the engines, to get into his harness. I tried to cut the graveys, but the switch stuck: it was going to be a rough ride. I felt reckless. Bob was close; if he tried to grab the *Eggbeater* now, he'd run a good chance of collision and of getting himself killed, if not all of us.

There was a lot of buffeting and slinging as the ship shunted from

course to course. I kept my eyes on Ripotee, not wanting to see evidence of impossible strain, of damage, of imminent ruin on the dials that encrusted the walls. He lay flat in his nest of straps secured to a padded niche over the internal monitor banks, his claws bradded into the fibers. He was Siamese, fawn beneath and seal-brown on top, a slight shading of stripes on his upper legs, cheeks, and forehead. He had street blood in him, none of your overbred mincing and neurosis there. I hoped he wasn't about to come to a crashing end on account of my feud with Netchkay.

I am a natural pilot but not what they call a shepherd, the kind who thrives on being alone in space. A good short haul ship can be managed by one operator and can carry more cargo that way, and I don't like crowding. So I had acquired Ripotee instead of a human partner.

He had been a gift as a kitten, along with a treatment contract on him for a place out in the Tic Tacs where they use pod infections to mutate animals upward—if humanizing their brains is actually a step in that direction. He came out of his pod fever with a good English vocabulary and a talent for being aggravating in pursuit of his own independence.

Even at his worst, he was the companion I needed, a reminder of something besides the bright sterility of space and its stars. There wasn't anything else. We had yet to find alien life of true intelligence. Meanwhile, the few Earth animals that had survived the Oil Age were all the more important to us—to those of us who cared about such things, anyway.

The ship dropped hard, slewing around to a new heading. Straps bit my skin. I thought of the time when, after a brush with some name-proud settlers on Le Cloue, I had asked Ripotee, "Do you want to change your name? Maybe you don't like being called 'Ripotee'?" I was thinking that it was hard for him to pronounce it, as he had some trouble with t's.

He had said, "I don't care, I don't have to say it. I can say 'I,' just like a person. Anyway, Ripotee isn't my name; it's just your name for me."

Only later I wondered whether this proud statement covered not some private name he had for himself but the fact that he had no name except the one I had given him.

I could hardly draw breath to think with now, and I was very glad to have had no breakfast but that cup of ersatz.

Another hard swing, and I smelled rotting pod; a cargo seal must

have broken and who knew what else. Ripotee let out a sudden wail—not pain, I hoped, just fear. I kept my eyes closed now. If he'd been shaken loose from his harness he could be slammed to death on the walls, just as I would be if I tried to go and help him.

One thing about Ripotee that neither of us nor his producers in the Tic Tacs knew was how long he had to live. He was approaching his first watermark, the eighth year, which if successfully passed normally qualifies a domestic cat for another seven or eight. In his case, we had no idea whether the pod infection had fitted him with a human life span to go with his amplified mind, or, given that, whether his physical small-animal frame would hold up to such extended usage. One thing was sure, enough of this battering around and he would end up just as punchy as any human pilot would.

I blacked out twice. Then everything smoothed down, and my power automatically cut as the landing beams locked on. A voice sang a peculiarly enriched English into my ears over the headset: looping vowels, a sonorous timbre—reminding me of Barnabas's voice. "Singlet Port. So now you will be boarded by a customs party. Please prepare to receive. . . ."

Prepare to give up—but never to Bob.

Ripotee was first out on New Niger. I sprung the forward hatch and a group of people came in; he padded right past them, tail in the air, none of your hanging about sniffing to decide whether or not it was worth his time to go through the doorway. Normally he's as cautious as any cat, but he is also given to wild fits of berserker courage that are part existential meanness and part tomcat.

He paused in his progress only to lay a delicate line of red down the back of a reaching hand—just an eyeblink swipe of one paw, an exclamation from the victim, and Ripotee was off, belly stretched in an ecstatic arc of all-out effort above the landing pad. Well out of reach, he paused with his tail quirked up in its play mode, glanced back, and then bounded sideways out of sight behind a heap of cartons and drums.

I had to pay a quarantine fine on him, of course. They were very annoyed to have lost any organisms he might have brought in with him that could be useful in pod experiments. The fine was partly offset by some prime wriggles they got out of me, leftovers from a visit to the swamps of Putt.

There were forms to fill out and a lot of "dash" to pay for hints on how to fill them out with the least chance of expensive mistakes. I stood in the security office, my head still fuzzy from the rough flight, and I wrote.

A young man with a long thin face like a deer's came and plucked me by the sleeve. He said in soft, accented English, "You are asked for, Missisi. Come with me please."

"Who?" I said, thinking damn it, Bob has landed, he's onto me already. I stalled. "I have these forms to finish—"

He looked at the official who had given me these books of papers and said, "Missisi Helen will see to it that everything is put right."

The official reached over, smiling, and eased the papers out from under my hand. "I did not know that Captain Steinway was a friend of Missisi Helen. Do not worry of your ship; it goes into our clean-out system because of the oatmeal."

My guide led me through corridors and once across a landing surface brilliant with sun. I wondered if this Missisi Helen was the famous Helen who had been trading from New Niger as far back as Aunt Juno's own times: a tough competitor.

We went to a hangar where a short hauler stood surrounded by half-unpacked bales and boxes and spilled fruit. For a barnyard flavor, chickens (the African lines would carry anything) ran among the feet of the passengers, who shouted and pawed through everything, looking, I supposed, for their own belongings mixed in with the scattered cargo. The mob, rumped and steamy with their own noise and excitement, was all Black except for one skinny, shiny-bald White man in the stained white sari of a Holy Wholist missionary. He stood serenely above it all.

I picked my way along after my guide, trying not to wrinkle my nose; after all, I'd had no more opportunity for a thorough bath and fresh change of clothing than these folks had. To tell the truth, I felt nervous in that crush and scramble of people; there were so many, and I had lived without other humans for a long time.

A knot of argument suddenly burst, and a little woman in a long rose-colored dress stepped out to meet me, snapping angrily over her shoulder at a man who reached pleadingly to restrain her: "And I tell you, it is for you some of my cargo was dumped cheap at Lagos Port to make room for this, your cousin. I am surprised you did not want my very ancestor's bones thrown away so you could bring your whole family! You will pay back for my lost profits, or I will make you very sorry! Speak there to my secretary."

She faced me, one heavily braceleted arm cocked hand-on-hip, her bare, stubby feet planted wide. Her hair, a tight, springy pile of gray, was cut and shaped into an exaggerated part, like two steep hills on her head. She tipped her head back and looked down her curved, broad, delicate nose at me.

"Dee Steinway. You do not look at all like your aunt Juno."

"I favor my father's side."

"As well," she said. "Juno ran to fat in her later years. I knew her well; I am Helen Nwanyeruwa, head of Heaven Never Fail Short Hauling Limited. Why are you here, and why did Bob Netchkay land right behind you, waving pieces of paper under the noses of customs?"

Well, that was straight out, and it shook me up a little bit. Most trading people talk around things to see what all the orbits are before they set a plain course. I looked nervously at the intent faces surrounding us. I said, "He wants to take my ship."

She grimaced. "With papers; that means with laws."

"I'd rather sell the ship to you before he can slap those papers on me," I said.

"What ship?"

"Not just any ship. The Steinway *Eggbeater*."

Her eyes were very bright. "Then it is good I have set some friends of mine here to wrapping Bob Netchkay in many, many yards of bright red tape. If you knew how often I tried to get Juno to trade me a ship of hers—" She looked me up and down, scowling now. "I don't want to have to discuss this over Netchkay's papers; so, we must hide you. Hey!" She spoke rapidly in her own language to one of her attendants, who hurried away.

Helen watched the attendant engage in an animated conversation with the Holy Wholist. "See that missionary," she commented, "how he waves his arms, he is all rattled about, he outrages as if back in his own place now, not a foreign planet. I tell you, some of these White priest people think they are still in nineteenth-century Africa when they throw their weights around. Ah, there, something is agreed; now tell me about this ship."

I started to tell her. Somewhere in the second paragraph, one and then the other of my legs were tapped and lifted as if I were a horse being shod. I looked down. My space boots had been deftly removed. Before I could object, I was wrapped in an odorous garment which I recognized disgustingly as the yards and yards of the Holy Wholist's grubby sari. The Wholist himself was gone.

"A trade," said Helen calmly, adjusting a fold of this raggedy toga into a pretty tuck at my waist.

"What, my mag shoes for his clothes? Come on!" Space boots—mag shoes, we call them—are valuable in industry for walking on metal walls and such.

"Not so simple," she said, "but in the end, yes. He said he would

take nothing for his sari but a permit to preach in the markets where we do not like such interferences. I know an official who has long wanted a certain emblem for the roof of his air car, for which he would surely give a preaching permit. And among my own family there is a young man upon whose air-sled there is fixed this same fancy metal emblem—"

"Which he was willing to swap for my mag shoes," I said. "But how did you work it all out so fast?"

"Why, I am a trader, what else?" Helen said. "Did your aunt never teach you not to interrupt your elders in the middle of a story?"

"Sorry," I muttered, got annoyed with myself for being so easily chastened, and added defiantly, "But I'm not going to shave my head as bare as the Wholist's for the sake of this fool disguise." I go bald-headed in space rather than fuss with hairnets and stiffeners and caps to keep long hair from swimming into my eyes in non-gravey. Approaching landfall, I always start it growing out again.

Helen shrugged. Then she whirled on her attendants and clapped her hands, shouting, "Is there no car to take these passengers to town?"

The passengers grabbed their things and were herded toward an ancient gas truck parked outside. The Heaven Never Fail Short Hauling Line seemed to deal in some very small consignments. The area was still littered with boxes and sacks. These were being haggled over by Helen's people and the drivers of air-sleds who loaded up and drove off.

Helen caught my arm and took me with her to a raised loading platform from which she could observe the exodus while she asked me about the *Sealyham Eggbeater*. She knew all the right questions to ask, about construction, running costs, capacity, maintenance record, logged travel history (and unlogged). When she heard of the long hauls that the little ship had made, she nodded shrewdly.

"So it has Juno's modifications; unshielded, as I have heard—it can be examined?"

"Yes."

"You do not know the specifications of the modifications yourself, do you?"

"I'm a pilot, not an engineer," I said huffily. It embarrasses me that I can't keep that sort of thing in my head.

She asked about the name of the ship.

I shrugged. "I don't know about '*Sealyham*,' but '*Eggbeater*' dates from when the Kootenay Line ran ships shaped like eggs and it became a great fashion. Aunt Juno didn't want to spend money to modify our

own ships, so we stuck with our webby, messy look and renamed all of them some kind of eggbeater."

Helen smiled and nodded. "Now I remember. At the time I suggested taking slogans for her ships as we do here. You know my ships' names: *In God Starry Hand*; *No Rich without Tears*; *Pearl of the Ocean Sky*. I have twenty-seven ships." She waved at the hangar floor. "You see how quickly my cargo is gone. I have a warehouse too but only small, and this is my one hangar. My goods move all the time, and my ships are moving them. Yams in the yam-house start no seedlings."

"Yams?" I said. I was beginning to feel a little feverish, probably from the antipoddies I'd taken before landing.

"You must scatter yams in the ground," Helen said impatiently. "In Old Africa. Yams don't grow here; we must import. But the saying is true everywhere, so my ships fly, my goods travel. I named the ships in old style pidgin talk from Africa, in honor of my beginnings—in my ancestors' lorry lines. All the lorries bore such fine slogans."

"My personal ship is *Let Them Say*. It means, I care nothing how people gossip on me, only how they work for me—"

She fell abruptly silent. Alarmed, I looked where she was looking. A machine was in the doorway I'd come in by, its scanner turning to sweep the hangar while its sensor arm patted about on the floor and door jambs.

Helen signaled to one of the freight sleds with a furious gesture. It lifted toward us. She tapped at her ear—that was when I noticed the speaker clipped there in the form of an earring—and said bitingly into a mike on her collar, "Robot sniffers are working this port, why were they not spotted, why was I not told?"

Jerked out of the spell of her exotic authority, I remembered my danger and I remembered Ripotee. "I had a companion, a cat—"

"It must find you, then. These machines come from the Steinway flagship."

I looked around frantically for some sign of Ripotee. "Don't you have to stay a little to make sure everything gets done right here?"

"My people will do for me. Sit down, that sniffer is turned this way."

With surprising strength, Helen yanked me onto the sled beside her; the sled, driven by a heavy girl in a bright blue jumper, slewed around and sped us swiftly out into the bright sunshine.

We headed toward a cluster of domes and spires some distance away. The sled skimmed over broad stubbly fields between high, shaggy green walls that were stands of trees and undergrowth: outposts of

the jungle Ripotee had spoken of. Other sleds followed and preceded ours, most of them fully loaded.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"To market, of course."

I remembered that Helen was an old opponent in the marketplaces of the worlds, and it occurred to me that perhaps she was simply keeping me scarce until she could trade me in for a good profit. I checked the driver's instruments out of the corner of my eye, gauging the possibility of jumping for it and hiding out on my own in the jungle or something, just in case I had to. Helen must have seen me because she laughed and patted my knee.

"Ah, my runaway White girl, what are you looking for? Is it that you are suspicious of me now? Netchkay flashes his papers about, claiming that you are space-sick and need to be protected from yourself, or why would you flee from your own family to the home of the trade rivals of the great Steinway Line? You think I might sell you to Bob Netchkay."

"Foolish! I am your friend here, and not only because of Juno and her invention, which can make me very much richer; not even only for the sake of the Steinway Line as it was in its heyday, all those bright, sharp little ships running rings around the big men and their big plans. Yes; not only for these reasons am I your friend, but because women know how to help each other here. The knowledge comes in the blood, from so many generations that lived as many wives to one man. They all competed like hell, but if the husband treated one wife badly, the others made complaint, and were sick, and scorched his food, until he behaved nicely again. So, here is Bob Netchkay being nasty with you; I will play co-wife, and for you I will scorch bad Bob's supper."

Now, why couldn't my own sister Nita take that line?

"That man is a fungus," I muttered.

"Now, that is the proper tone," Helen said approvingly, "for a missionary talking about one of another sect." Then she added with serene and perfect confidence, "As for Netchkay, I will shortly think what to do about him."

"First tell me just what you yourself want out of it."

"My ship back and some money to start flying." On a sudden inspiration I added, "My mag shoes were worth much more than this Holy Wholey rag I'm wearing. You have to count them in any deal between us."

She let that pass and leaned forward to snap out an order to our

driver. "There is the market," she said to me, indicating a high translucent dome with landing pads hitched round it in a circle like a halo on a bald head.

I scowled. "I know you have business there; but what good is the market to me?"

"Bob Netchkay's robot sniffers cannot enter on your trail. No servos are permitted on the market floor. They are not agile enough for the crowds and always get trampled and pushed about until they break, and then they sit there in the way with their screamers on for assistance, driving everyone mad. In there you must play missionary a little. White missionaries are not remarkable here on New Niger; if those sniffers ask of you outside the market from people coming out, they will learn nothing.

"Sit still and be quiet till we land, I must listen to the trading reports."

She turned up the volume on the button communicator in her earring and ignored me. I studied her as we neared the market building. She didn't look old enough to have known Aunt Juno, but it never occurred to me to doubt that she had. I thought I saw in her the restless, swift energy of my aunt. In Helen it was keen ambition, right out there on the surface for all to see. Helen even had the same alert, eager poise of the head that Aunt Juno had so noticeably developed along with her progressive nearsightedness.

She shooed me out onto a ribbon lift which lowered me to the edge of the immense seethe and roar of the jam-packed market floor. She herself boarded a little floater. That way she could oversee the trading at her booths, darting like an insect from one end of the hall to the other.

I took up a position as deep within the crowd as I could elbow myself room. On my right a fat woman hawked chili-fruits from Novi Nussbaum; on my left squawking chickens were passed over the heads of the crowd to their purchasers. Women carrying loads on their heads strode between buyers and sellers, yelling at each other in the roughly defined aisles between stalls.

I shouted myself what I imagined might be the spiel of a Holy Wholist: "The sky of New Niger is the sky of Old Earth; our souls are pieces of one great eggshell enclosing the universe!" and similar rubbish. Some of the crowd stopped around me; about a dozen women, and two men with red eyes and the swaying stance of drunks.

Suddenly there was a shriek from the chili-fruit woman. Over a milling of excited marketers I could just glimpse her slapping among her wares with her shoe.

Helen's floater zipped in; she seized the shouting woman by the arm and spoke harshly into her ear, reducing her to silence. I managed to insinuate myself through the crowd, which was already beginning to disperse in search of more interesting matters.

Helen said to me in a venomous whisper, "Did you hear it? This woman says she saw moving, maybe, a sweetsucker among the chili-fruits. A sweetsucker, can you imagine, carried all the way from Novi Nussbaum with my cargo!"

The vendor, eyes cast down, muttered, "I saw it, I am telling you—sweetsucker or not. A long thing like what they call snake in Iboland, but hairy, and making a nasty sound," and she drew her lips back and made clicking sounds with her tongue and widely chomping teeth, like a kid who hasn't learned yet to chew with its mouth closed. It was just the sound Ripotee makes when he's eating.

Helen rounded on the woman again, snarling threats: "If you spread rumors of sweetsuckers drying up my Novi Nussbaum fruits, I will see you not only never sell for me again but find every market on New Niger closed to you!"

I bent down and hunted quietly around the stand, calling Ripotee's name. Not quietly enough: some friendly people at the next stall over turned to watch and saw my religious attire. Identifying my behavior as some exotic prayer ceremony, they cheerfully took up my call as a chant, clapping their hands: "Rip-o-tee! Rip-o-tee!"

Helen took me firmly by the wrist. "What are you doing?"

"This vending woman must have seen my cat."

"And by now many people in the market have your cat's name in their mouths, which is very foolish and not good for us. Netchkay is clever, and I just now get word that seeing he could not introduce his machines here to find if you are at the market, he has sent instead your own sister, Nita Steinway. She will know that cat's name if she hears it spoken, and she will look for you. So we must go at once, though it means I break my business early, which I do not like at all."

She propelled me onto the floater with her, hovering there a moment to give curt orders to the vending woman: "Go take these chili-fruits to put water in them and plump them up, so no one will believe this nonsense about sweetsuckers!" We rose straight for one of the roof hatches.

I said, "Helen, my cat—"

"Oh, your cat, this cat is driving me mad!" she cried, shooting us out onto one of the landing pads again and bustling me sharply into a waiting town skipper. It was an elegant model with hardwood and

bright silver fittings inside. She drove it herself, shying us through the sky in aggressive swoops that made other skippers edge nervously out of our way.

"Now listen, is it this cat you want to talk about or diddling Bob Netchkay? If you are interested, I have arranged it; I have set engineers to copying the Steinway modification from your ship. When plans are drawn we will show them to Netchkay. If he wants them sold to every short hauler in the business, he can continue to worry you. If he agrees to leave you alone, he will have only one competitor with the secret of long hauling in short haul ships: myself."

Chuckling, she sideslipped us past a steeple that had risen unexpectedly before us. "Oh, he will grind his teeth to powder, and I—I will be the one to carry on the true spirit of the Steinway Line."

I looked down at the bubble buildings we were skimming over, interspersed with what looked like not very satisfactorily transplanted palm trees, all brown and drooping. I felt lonesome and exposed in the hands of Helen Nwanyeruwa above that alien townscape.

We landed on the roof of a square, solid cement building. Helen shouted for attendants to come moor the skipper and for a guide to show me to my room. She said kindly, "Go there now, I have made a surprise for you. Maybe then you will stop wailing after this cat and enjoy my party tonight."

The surprise was Barnabas, sitting on the bed and grinning. He had grown a curl of beard along his jawline and wore not a captain's jumper but tan cord pants and a gownlike shirt of green and black.

"Barnabas!" I said. "What in the worlds—"

"Everybody here knows you and I have met and made connection before. New Niger is the marketplace of gossip."

"Better to make connection than to just talk about it," I said and began tossing off my clothes. I'd forgotten that peculiarly electrical expression of New Nigerian English; it set me off. I was suddenly so horny I could hardly see straight.

In space I forget; most of us do, though we like to keep up the legend of rampant pilots whooping it up in free fall. Actually, all that is inhibited out there, maybe by stress. But it comes back fast and furious when you are aground again.

Barnabas had the presence of mind to get up and shut the door. He knew right away what was happening and threw himself into it with a cheerful, warm gusto that had me almost in tears. I finally had to beg off because he was making me sore with all that driving, and he

tumbled off me sideways, laughing: "Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, but it is long since I did this with a crew-cut woman!"

"It's the first thing I've done on New Niger that didn't feel all foreign and strange," I said. "Let's do it again, but this time I'll get on top."

Later on a small boy came padding in with his eyes downcast bringing us towels, and padded out again. Two towels.

Pilots tend to be a little prudish about these things, which are after all more important and isolated incidents for us than for your average planet-bunny with all his or her opportunities. "Don't you people know what servomechs are for?" I grumbled.

Barnabas was stroking my throat. "You have a beautiful neck, just like the belly of a snake. No, no, that is compliment! Don't mind the youngsters—Helen gives employment to many children of relatives. She is very rich, you know."

"How did he know there were two of us needing towels?"

"Everyone knows I was up here, and what else does a man do with a woman. They forget that I am a captain myself and might have business to talk with you. To people here, I am just a man, good only for fun and fathering. . . ."

At his sudden glance of inquiry and concern I shook my head. "Lord no, Barnabas, I shot myself full of antipoddies before leaving the ship. Otherwise I'd be nailed to the toilet with the runs." All pilots use antis on landfall. You have to make a special effort to conceive.

"I have several children now," Barnabas said, and his voice took a bitter edge. "But unfortunately no ship. A falling out with my employer." He smiled wryly. "I am sorry for myself. What have you been doing, Deedee? I hear you have a lot of trouble with Bob Netchkay and your sister."

I explained. He grimaced and shook his head, half condemning, half admiring. "I told you long ago, that man is to be watched; he has plenty of brains and drive, and with your clever sister to help him he is making a great company to rival even the Chinese."

"He's a fungus," I said. I liked that word.

Barnabas laughed. "Let's not argue in the shower."

We stood in the wet corner under the fine spray shooting in from the walls and talked, rubbing and sponging each other and picking our hairs out of the drain. Then we toweled off, got back on the bed, and soon had to clean up all over again.

"Can you stay a while?" I asked, stroking the long muscles woven across his back. "You're doing me a lot of good, Barnabas."

"Me, too," he said. "To be free of the worry, you know, of not making

babies. . . . They like a man to be fertile here." He shrugged and changed the subject. "Tell me about Ripotee. I was thinking of him just now; he used to complain that it was disgusting, us two together—"

"I think he was just jealous, not really overcome with horror at our inordinate hugenesses rolling around together. I tried taking a female cat aboard for him, but he couldn't stand her." I started to cry.

Barnabas hugged me and made soothing sounds into my frizz of new-grown hair. I blubbed out how Ripotee had left the ship before I could do anything, even shoot him with antis. "He was in one of his crazy derring-do fits. He kept up with me as far as the market, but since then I don't know—Helen doesn't care. Maybe she's already heard that he's been caught and eaten. From what I've seen, no animals survive here except humans and chickens. People must be crazy for a taste of red meat—"

"Not cat meat, it is awful!" Barnabas exploded.

We curled up together and talked about Ripotee. I told Barnabas how it made me feel so peculiar to think back to the days when Ripotee had been a dumb cat that I could shove around and tickle and yell at, as people do with cats, without a thought. I'd teased him, called him all kinds of names, grabbed him up, and scrubbed him under the chin 'til he half-fainted with delight.

I didn't do things like that anymore.

"Don't be put off," Barnabas said. "It is only his pride that keeps him from flopping down for a chin rub just as he used to do, and he would love for you to push him over and rub his chin anyway."

I shook my head. "He's changed since you knew him. I think it's all that reading. When he lies relaxed with his eyes half shut looking at nothing, I know he's not falling asleep anymore; now he's brooding. Like a person."

Barnabas stood up and pulled on his shorts. "He is luckier than a person. If he were a mere man, he would be protesting always how all he needs are his mates, he must have good fellows to drink with and gossip and play cards."

"This afternoon you and I certainly proved that's a lie," I said smugly.

He didn't smile; he wrinkled his nose and sat down again, putting his arm around my shoulders. "But this is what they say here, and the women of New Niger can make it stick, too, I tell you. You know, Dee, I might have inherited wealth as you did, but my great grandfather was too ambitious. He was seduced by the big trade of international business like many other men in Nigeria. He jumped to put his money

into the big boom of Europe and America, just as he had jumped right into Christianity and having only one wife at a time.

"So then the wars and the bad weather came and broke all the high finance, and him with it, among all the rest. He was left nothing but a worn-out yam farm in an overcrowded, overworked corner of Iboland in the Eastern Region. Nobody had much of anything in Nigeria then, except some of the women traders with lorry fleets—the lorry mammies—and those who went even on foot from market to market, dealing haircombs and matches and sugar by the cube. They became the ones with funds to put into space travel.

"So here I am on the world they settled, trying to get rich myself. And who do you think is my boss, the one that is giving me trouble and keeping me grounded?"

"A woman," I guessed.

"A cousin of Helen's, and a woman, yes." He slipped on one of his plastic sandals. "The other men say, take it easy, relax and enjoy some drinking."

I felt less than completely sympathetic; I heard that angry, self-pitying tone again and didn't like it. I said lightly, "These women of New Niger are some tough ladies."

He answered with a grudging pride: "Listen, long ago, when your ancestor-mothers were chaining themselves to the gates of politicians' houses, my ancestor-mothers were rousing each other to riot against the English colonials' plan to take census of women and women's property. It was thought this would lead to special taxing of these women, for even then there were many wives who were farmers and petty traders on their own. They made what is still called the Women's War. Thousands rose up in different places to catch the chiefs the English had appointed and to sit on them—it means to frighten and belittle a man with angry, insulting songs and to spoil his property. They tore some public buildings to the ground. In all some fifty women were shot dead by the authorities, and many more were wounded—that is how frightened the government were. No tax was applied, and the English had a big inquiry in their parliament on how to rule Iboland.

"Helen herself is named for the woman who began the War. On being told in her own yard to count her goats and children, this woman shouted to the official who said it, 'Was your mother counted?' and seized him by the throat."

I could well believe it and said so.

Barnabas got up again.

"Where are you off to?" I said. Talking with him like this was almost like old times together in space.

"I must get ready for the party; you should, too. Tonight Helen Nwanyeruwa holds a feast for the spirit of her ancestor the lorry mammy. Wealthy Missisi Helen had the ancestor-bones brought here on one of her ships; the spirit would not dare to displease her by staying behind."

He bent and rested both hands on my shoulders, looking intently into my face. "It is very good to see you, Deedee."

The outer surfaces of the house were illuminated so that the walled courtyard was brilliantly lit for the party. Family and guests milled around on the quickie grass, grown for the evening in an hour to cover where the plastic paving had been rolled back.

Wrapped in my Holy Wholist sari, worn properly this time with nothing underneath—it didn't bother me; I often go naked in my ship—I milled around with the best of them. As a missionary I was not expected to join the dancing, for which I was grateful. I felt nervous and shy and alien, and I wandered over toward where Helen sat on a huge couch beside the shrine she had had erected: a concrete stele with the image of a truck on it. On the way I passed a line of men and a line of women dancing opposite each other, and Barnabas stepped to my side out of the men's line. His skin was shiny with sweat. He caught me around the waist and murmured in my ear, "You and I do our own private dancing, Deedee, later on."

As we approached, Helen patted the slowflow plastic next to her, making room for me but not for Barnabas. He joined the crowd of retainers on her right.

Helen wore African clothing of sparkling silverweave and a piece of the same cloth tied around her head into an elaborate turban. Even her white plastic sandals couldn't spoil the effect. She was beautiful; by comparison, those around her who affected the fashionable billowing Victorian look of the new Romanticism seemed puny and laughable.

Sitting beside her wiry, tense body on the surface that slowly molded to my shape, I felt protected by her feisty energy. Yet her boldness in having me up there in full view endangered me; suppose Bob had spies here? The drums thundered in the spaces of the courtyard. I gulped down the drink she handed me. It tasted like lemonade filtered through flannel.

I shivered. "Helen, what if—an enemy hears the drums and comes to your party?"

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye and said with haughty dismissiveness, "No enemy has been invited."

This was repeated among the others around us and brought much laughter. Of course she must have robot guards, computer security systems, and so on, I thought; but I felt edgy.

Barnabas leaned toward us. "Even so, Missisi Helen, it might be wise to take extra care. I myself and a few friends have devised a special power hookup—"

Helen set down her drink and turned to him. "Don't worry yourself about these things, Barnabas; you will only get in the way. You are a good, strong young man, and Missisi Alicia tells me you have fathered a fine baby in her family. Go and drink from my private casks, over there, you and your friends. Go amuse yourselves."

Barnabas spun and forced his way out through the crowd toward the dancers—then swerved sharply back toward the bar.

"Why are you so hard on him?" I said.

"These boys get too big ideas of themselves, especially the young ones who have been out in space," Helen replied, reaching for a fresh drink from a tray offered her. "They begin thinking their fathers ran fleets of lorries, too."

Everybody whooped over this. Helen was excited, feeding off the high spirits of those who fed off her own. She flung out her arm, pointing at a young man in the forefront of a huddle of others who had been looking our way on and off for quite a while. He resisted his friends' efforts to push him forward.

"You see that boy there," she said, pitching her voice so that everyone near the ancestor shrine must hear, "he has been chasing after that girl, my Anne, who is still nearly a baby, but he has not taken up his courage to speak to me about her. And he boasts that his father hunts lions with a spear in Old Africa, where there are fewer lions than here on New Niger." She snatched up a pebble and pitched it not to strike but to startle into squawking flight one of the ubiquitous chickens pecking for scraps around a food table. "See what kind of lions we have here! Just such as that boy's father hunts, just so fierce!"

At last, something familiar—the suitor who didn't suit Mother. "Anne is one of your daughters?"

"Oh no," Helen replied proudly, "one of my wives."

I didn't know what to say. Helen grinned at me, plainly pleased with the effect of her words.

"I have lots of wives," she added with great satisfaction. "It was always Ibo custom that a woman rich enough to support wives could marry so; and I am very rich. My Anne will find herself a young man.

who makes her happy for a while. No fear, in time she will bring me a child of that union to be brother or sister to the children of my own body and my other wives'."

She gave me an affectionate hug, chuckling. "Just as you look now, so shocked, that is how your aunt looked when I married my first wife. Even once I told her, 'Juno, you should have daughters to comfort your old age **and** inherit your goods. Do as I do, there **must** be some White way **with** many documents.' But she said, 'I only **have** time for one creation, and that is the Steinway Line.' Then she laughed because it was the kind of grand talk men use to impress each other; we both knew the petty trading would go on as always, while the men heroes choke on their grand schemes.

"I live by that petty trading, and I live well, as you see. Come make fast to my own good fortune, as in one of our African sayings: if a person is not successful at trading in the market, it would be cowardly to run away; instead she should change her merchandise.

"Give up wishing to be admiral of a trading fleet, and say you will come work for my company, my bold White flyer."

I was looking at Barnabas. He danced, his shoulders rippling like water shunting down a long container, first to one end and then to the other. A bit wobbly, in fact; as he turned without seeing me, I realized that it was not only the ecstasy of the dance that sealed his eyes. He was drunk. I was alone among strangers.

I shook my head.

"You are too stubborn," Helen said, giving me a thump in the side with her elbow. But she didn't look unhappy. Maybe she thought I was just making a move in a complicated bargaining game, and approved. If I were any good at that kind of thing, I wouldn't have been in this spot with Bob. It's not the dealing I love, it's the piloting. Helen didn't know me well enough yet to really understand that. "Well," she added, "you must do what suits you, and let them say!"

Somebody screamed, there was a swirling in the crowd as one of the food tables crashed down, and a girl came flying toward us, shrieking. I leaped up, thinking, Netchkay has come, someone has been hurt because of him; but I was fuddled with drink and couldn't think what to do.

Helen strode to meet the screaming girl.

"It spoke to me, the spirit of your ancestor," the girl gibbered, twisting her head to stare wide-eyed over her shoulder at the tumbled ruin of the food table. "I was serving food, Missisi Helen, as you told me, and a little high voice said from someplace down low, behind me, 'A

piece of light meat, please, cut up small on a plate.' I looked in the dark by the wall, I saw eyes like red-hot coins."

I hurried unsteadily over to where two servos were already sucking up the mess and getting in each other's way.

Behind me I heard the girl: "I was afraid, Missisi. The spirit repeated, so I put down food, but then someone passed behind me and I heard the spirit cry, 'Get off my tail!' and it vanished. Mary thinks she stepped on it—Oh, Missisi Helen, will Mary and me be cursed?"

I shoved one of the servos aside, looking for the poor, crushed remains of Ripotee.

I found nothing but a hole in the wall, low, rounded, and utterly puzzling. I rapped on the nearest servo, which was busy wiping at some sauce with the trailing end of my sari, apparently under the impression that this was a large, handy rag.

"What's this?" I said into the speaker of the servo, pointing at the hole. "Where does it lead to?"

"Madam or sir, it is hole for fowl," creaked the servo. "Madam or sir, it leads in for chickens seeking entry to this compound for the night and leads out for "

"All right, all right," I said. While addressing me the tin fool had decided the sari was beyond salvage, and had begun ingesting it into its canister body for disposal. I yanked.

The servo clicked disapprovingly and sheared off the swallowed portion of my garment with an interior blade. I made my way back through the crowd toward Helen, rearranging the remains of my clothing and swearing to myself.

"—not possible that my ancestor has returned as *an animal*," Helen was saying in an ominous voice. "Felicity, remember this: I took you from your mother for a good bride price, I put you to school. I have adopted your children for my own. Now think what you are saying to me of my own ancestor here before all my guests."

Silence. I elbowed near enough to see just as the girl dropped suddenly full length on the ground, her hands spread flat beside her shoulders like someone doing the down part of a push-up.

The crowd gave a satisfied sigh; but Helen stamped her foot in exasperation and said, "We are not in Old Africa now; I will not have you prostrating to me. Just get up and ask my pardon nicely." She looked pleased though.

Felicity scrambled to her feet and whispered an apology. Helen came and linked her arm through mine, saying loudly, "If it was somebody's ancestor, it must go find food at the house of its proper descendants."

In a lower voice she continued, "Monitors have been found under some of the spilled serving dishes; Netchkay will know you are here. You must leave for a mission church away from Singlet, just until my engineers have finished work on your ship. One of my freight sleds will take you. It goes at midmorning tomorrow to tour the market towns. By the time you return—"

"Helen, listen, I can't just take off again like this. My cat is still hanging around here someplace—"

"Oh, cat, cat! You must get your mind to business now." She fiddled impatiently with her ear-speaker. "Do you think I can keep track of all that happens here? I have a dozen wives to attend to. This is only an animal, after all."

"Ripotee is my friend."

"Then you must hope for the best for your friend, and meanwhile go and rest; you have a journey tomorrow."

And she walked away and stepped into the center of one of the lines of dancing women, stamping and whirling and flipping her head to the different parts of the complex beat, lithe as a girl.

When Barnabas came to my room, it was not to tumble into my bed.

I had fallen asleep, still in my sari, despite the music and voices from the courtyard. He shook me awake in the half-lit room—it was quiet now, near dawn—and whispered, "Dee—you can stop worrying about Ripotee. I have him safe for you, outside with a friend of mine who found him."

His breath smelled of liquor, but he seemed steady and alert, and I could have hugged him for the news he brought. I followed him downstairs. Someone murmured, from within another room with its door ajar, "Barnabas?" A woman's voice; and I thought, Ha, he has other beds to sleep in at Helen's house than mine, no wonder he can visit as he likes.

I ran with him across the courtyard, holding up my hem to keep from tripping. As we passed out of the gateway, a long air car swept silently toward us and stopped. A door opened. I bent to look inside, and Barnabas grabbed both my arms from behind and thrust me forward into the interior, where not Ripotee but someone else waited. I tried to twist away, but Barnabas shoved in beside me, pinning me hard with his hip and shoulder. The other person was Nita, my sister.

While I was still caught in the first breathless explosion of shock and incredulous outrage, she slapped a little needle into my neck. She may be a lambchop, my sultry sister, but she is quick. Quicker than

I am, who had never stopped to wonder in my sleepy daze why Barnabas hadn't just brought Ripotee up to me himself.

"—too much in the needle," Barnabas was saying in underwater tones. I could feel breath on each cheek, and on one side was a tinge of wine odor: Barnabas. I was sitting wedged between them. It occurred to me that the antipoddies I had taken might have buffered the effect of the drug. I hoped so; and hoped that Barnabas, out of practice at the transition from space to land, would forget about the effects of antis.

"You've never fought with Dee," Nita said. "She's strong as a servo, and I'm not taking any chances." She fidgeted next to me, trying to get at something tucked into her clothing, doubtless another needle.

Barnabas said firmly, "If you give another needle, this is all finished. I will go back to Helen and tell everything. Mr. Netchkay and I made particular agreement that there would be no risk of harm to Dee."

A moment of frigid tenseness: good, good, fight or something. Shoot me again, Nita, it would be worth it, if only Barnabas would then go to Helen as he threatened.

She didn't, and he didn't. I smelled dust, smoke, and was that rocket fuel? The car stopped, and I slumped helplessly there until he hauled me out with a fair amount of grunting. True to her chosen style, Nita let Barnabas do the work: he was the man, after all. I was set down on a metal surface in what felt like an enclosed space. There was a nasty odor in the air.

Barnabas's hands moved mine to set them comfortably under my cheek, as if I lay sleeping. He whispered in my ear. I shut out the words, knowing what they would be: that he was sorry, that the only way he could go out as a pilot again was to work for a foreigner like Netchkay; that this was his only chance. That he would be sure nothing terrible happened to me. And so on.

I didn't blame him, exactly. I just felt sick and sorry. There isn't a captain alive who wouldn't understand the feeling of sitting on a planet for years, going soft in the head on a soft life, while good reflexes and knowledge soak away.

Nita was another story. I wondered if she hated me, if she meant to do me some hideous injury while I lay there defenseless.

"Please leave me alone with my sister, Captain," she said. Barnabas made no more apologies to me; I heard his quiet steps recede.

Nita folded herself neatly, with poise, beside me. I didn't see her, but I knew, for her, there would be nothing so inelegant as a squat. Warm drops wet my cheek.

"You look awful," she groaned. "Dressed like a fanatic of some skinhead sect and smelling like a savage—Honestly, Dee, you are so crazy! Why don't you let us take care of you? Bob's not a bad man. He did take the Steinway Line, but he saved it from ruin—won't you credit him with that?"

She paused, snuffing forlornly. I wanted to cry myself. And in her accustomed manner, she was making it very hard for me to hate her. Nita never let anything happen the easy way for others, only for herself. It was very easy for her to betray me because she had fooled herself into believing she was doing the right thing.

"I hope there are no rats in here," she said miserably. "But I had to talk to you. Once Bob comes, it'll be all shouting and cursing and nobody getting in a sensible word.

"There's going to be a war. The independent short haul traders have had enough of being wrung dry by the Chinese long haulers, and Bob has finally gotten them together on a plan to take the Chinese long haul trade into American hands. So for a while there aren't going to be any nifty little short haul ships operating on their own, flitting around as they please, and calling themselves freelancers—your way. It's going to be too dangerous. Everyone will have to choose a side and stick with it. But you've got no sense. You'll hold out on your own in some old ship and end getting blown up by us or the other side—and I'm not going to tolerate it."

She patted my fuzz of hair and pulled at my wrap, arranging me as a more modest heap on the floor. She blew her nose and added resentfully, "Bob says it's no more than you deserve, charging around the way you do. He should have known Aunt Juno, the awful example she set us—as if every girl could be like that, or should be! She may not have meant to get you killed, but that's just what it will turn out to be by leaving you spaceships to run. She thought you were tough as a man, like her."

More sniffing. "She never thought much of me; but then I was always the realist."

Sure, if realism means you just coast along looking for somebody to notice how pretty you make yourself so they take the burden of your own life off your shoulders for you. I almost told her that, before reminding myself that my best chance was to fake being more knocked out by the drug than I was, so she wouldn't give me another shot. While I burned, she prattled on, fixing up my wayward life, and Aunt Juno's wayward life, too, for that matter, her own way.

"You and Bob and I would make a great team, once you got off your

high horse and left the strategy to him. Bob's a natural leader. He'll do well, you'll see. But you have to come in with us, you have to stop fighting us and charging off in any crazy direction you feel like! Honestly, sometimes I think I must be the older one and you the younger.

"I haven't had even a minute to sit down and talk to you in more than four home years, do you realize that? I bet you don't even notice."

So she shot me after all, if only with guilt, an old lambchop trick. I was the older sister; it was all my fault, whatever "it" happened to be. BULLSHIT, I yelled silently. HELP, SOMEBODY!

"I'm warning you, Dee; if you insist on bucking Bob, I'll side with him. We'll see that you spend the war out of harm's way in nice, quiet seclusion somewhere, and so drugged up for your own good that you'll never get your pilot's license renewed again. Grounded forever. Think about it, Dee, please. This isn't just what you want and what I want anymore. You've got to be realistic."

Then she leaned down and kissed me, my sister who knew how to set all my defense alarm systems roaring in a panic; and I swear the kiss was honest.

I was so glad when she got up and walked out that I nearly bawled with relief. A little while passed. I lay there trying to flex my sluggish muscles, thinking about being locked up, thinking about being grounded for good, so I shouldn't worry Nita or inconvenience Bob. I wondered if Barnabas would repent and go tell Helen what had happened; and what, if anything, Helen would or could do about me.

The place had a real stink to it, laced with the faint pungence of Barnabas's sweat and Nita's perfumes. Later on there was another smell: stinky cat breath, by the stars!

"Ripotee." I strained to see; by this time the drug had begun to wear off. There had to be some light in the place because there were the reflections in Ripotee's eyes, not a foot from my face: just as Felicity had said, two burning red coins. I couldn't reach out to him, and he came no closer. "Are you hurt?" I cried.

"I'm fine, but hungry. At your party someone tramped on my tail before I could get anything to eat, and there's nothing here—they cleaned out my mice with the oatmeal."

What a pleasure it was to hear his voice—any voice, most particularly two voices, instead of Nita's sugary tones foretelling my ruin. I tried to sit up. My hand encountered a line of rivets in the wall beside me.

"What is this? Where has Bob had me locked up?"

Ripotee said, "We're in the hold of the *Sealyham Eggbeater*."

"Shit," I said. Now I recognized the smell, pod rot plus cleanzymes. So Bob had the *Eggbeater* and he had me, and he had Ripotee, too, now; which made me feel very stupid, very tired, and a little mean.

Ripotee elaborated. "Bob is outside. He took the flagship up last night. Now he's trying to buy clearance so he can take the *Eggbeater* up too, even though it's still officially in the cleaning process." He was angry. His tail kept slap-slapping the floor.

It annoyed me that he could see me in that darkness, and I couldn't see him. Sitting there blind, holding myself up against the wall, I said, "How was the jungle, Ripotee?"

"Hot," he said, "and tangled and full of bugs. Some of them are living in my ears. You smell of medicine."

"Drug. It's almost all worn off." I could hear his tail flailing away at the floor and the wall, and the faint click of his claws as he paced. I said, "Why did you stay away like that? I was worried to death about you."

"I just wanted to be on my own out there in the jungle, like the big cats used to be on Old Earth. It was lonesome. There was nobody there but chickens. I got mad and hungry and I ate some. People chased me." He coughed, minute explosions. I could see the blurry red disks of his eyes again. "I wanted to land here, but there isn't anything here for me; like there isn't anything here for you."

"What I really wanted," he added fiercely, "was a fight, as a matter of fact; another cat to fight with." This was solid ground. I knew how he loved to go tomming it at any landfall we made, coming home bloody and limping and high on adrenaline. I think he liked the instinctual speed and strength and ferocity of the contest, no chance to think, let alone talk. Which contradicted the last thing he'd said about the jungle, but he's just as capable of wanting two opposing things at the same time as I am.

"You just couldn't stand it that I was out there on my own," he raged, "you were scared I'd turn wild or something—a fish dropping back into the water will swim away and forget, that's all you thought I'd do. Well, even when my brain was just kitty brains it was bigger than that!"

"I was worried about you!" I yelled.

"Poor Ripotee, dumb Ripotee can't possibly manage on his own." He was pacing again. "In the jungle his ancestors ruled like kings; he needs his soft-bodied human to look after him and protect him! Go marry some rich man so you can retire from space and look after him!"

"Oh, Ripotee—"

"Don't talk to me!" His agitated voice wound right up into a real old-fashioned Siamese yowl.

That yowl was heard; the hatch was swung open, letting in a sweep of light, and Bob stood framed against the afternoon outside. What a blast of energy it gave me to see that tall, strong, masterful silhouette: just what I needed to nerve me up for a fight.

"If it isn't the voice of the talking cat," he said. "I'd know it anywhere, damned unnatural noise. Nita's worried about the shot she gave you, Dee, but if you're trading mouse stories with the jumped-up lap-warmer you must be okay."

He didn't seem to have people with him, but I thought I heard voices outside; or was it only the cackling of the inescapable chickens of New Niger?

He read my admittedly obvious thoughts. "I have friends with me. Oh, yes, your friends are here too, I wouldn't lie to you, but there's nothing they can do for a foreigner in the face of trade federation papers—except obstruct and annoy me. When your friends run out of obstruction and annoyance, my friends will be free to come in here where you can't duck me again, and they'll be my witnesses and hold you down while I serve you with these papers."

One thing was certain, and that was that my friends couldn't help me as long as they were outside and I was trapped in here.

I said, "Go to hell," while patting madly around on the floor in search of something, anything, to use as a weapon. All I had was the Holy Wholely sari; so I pulled that off and rested there on my knees with it in my hands, wondering how much Bob could see in the dimness of the hold.

I could see him fairly well. He was wearing one of those wide light capes popular in the upper ranks of federation office. It can disguise the fact that many of the members come from worlds where the human form has been pretty heavily engeneticized to fit alien environments. Bob let his hang loose to the floor so that anyone could see what a fine, straight figure of a man he was. And he was, too. Nita has good taste—in appearances.

Myself, I have good taste in disasters, which was what led me to be crouching naked in front of my enemy, nothing but a bunch of wrinkled cloth in my fists, nothing at all in my head.

Ripotee minced over and rubbed against Bob's ankle. I held my breath. He said, "Something to tell you, Uncle Bob," using the twee little voice and baby talk that Bob always wanted from him.

With his head up so that he could keep an eye on me, Bob sank

onto his haunches. He wasn't dumb enough to try to pick Ripotee up, something that even I seldom did and never without an invitation. He hunkered there in the doorway, one hand braced on the floor, the other hooked into his belt; a dashing figure even on his hams.

Ripotee said, "I want to go away with you, Uncle Bob; will you take me, for a secret? A secret about the Steinway modification?"

Bob bent a little lower, bringing his dark Byronic curls closer to Ripotee's narrow face.

Ripotee did what a fighting tom does; he shot up so high on his hind legs that he stood for an instant on the tip of his extended tail, and he let go a left and right too swift to see. Bob screamed and reared up, both hands clapped to his face, and Ripotee leaped between his legs and out of the hatchway.

Holding my garment stretched out in front of me, I flung myself at the light, bowling Bob out onto the ground with me, entangled in folds of cloth. I am not a giant, regardless of Ripotee's opinion, but I am solid and I landed on top, knees and elbows first.

People came rushing over and pried us apart, lifting me to my feet and trying to wrap me up. I think some thought Bob had gotten my clothes off me for some nefarious purpose and were somewhat miffed by my own lack of concern. As I said, I float around naked in space a lot, and I carried it off pretty coolly.

When Bob panted that he was all right, his eyes hadn't been touched, I thought, thank gods. It was enough to be able to laugh freely at the sight he made, scrubbing at his blood-smeared face with his prettily embroidered cuffs.

At my side Helen said rapidly, "He has a federation warrant to suspend your license and immobilize you pending mental exam. It applies at once, as you are not a citizen here."

Shaking bright drops onto the soiled white cloth heaped on the ground at his feet, Bob groped for the paper held out by one of his minions.

I spoke first. "Helen, you'd make any girl a wonderful husband. Will you marry me?"

Helen swooped down on a chicken that was scrabbling around by our feet. She bit off its head and spit it out, held up the fluttering corpse and sprinkled us both with blood. Then she tossed the bird away, threw her arms around my waist, and announced loudly, "Robert Wilkie Netchkay Steinway—that is your name on those papers?—you and your people are invited to my house tonight to celebrate this wedding I have just made here with Dee Steinway. It is sudden, but here

in New Niger we have very hot blood and we do things suddenly. I myself am surprised to find that I have married again.

"As for your papers, they cannot be executed on a woman of New Niger. Try going through the local courts if you wish. You will find many of my relatives there hard at work; just as I have numbers of cousins and grown children working also here at Singlet Port, where you docked your big ship illegally yesterday."

"Docked illegally?" snapped Bob. "Your own port people let me in and let me out again."

"Someone made a mistake," said Helen blandly. "Your flagship was too big for our facilities. Some damage has been done and certain other traders were prevented from landing and have suffered losses on that account. There will be a large fine, I fear."

"If you do not come tonight," she added, "I will be very insulted, and so too will all my hardworking relatives. Also you would miss a fine trade we are arranging for you, to make you happy at our celebration."

As we walked away amid Helen's voluble crowd of supporters, I looked back; there was the *Eggbeater*, freshly plated and rewired, ports open to let in the air. There was Bob, trying to push Nita off him as she clung and wailed.

And there was Ripotee, trotting along behind us, a few feathers stuck to his whiskers.

As the bride, I didn't have anything to do at the wedding feast but dance around. Helen and a few of her kindred skilled in law and business sat at a table with Bob, Nita, a mess of papers, and a records terminal. They talked while platters of food were brought, notably the speciality of the evening. Yams Wriggly, an Oriental dish; the wriggles came from a Red Joy tariff delegation. Bob himself didn't eat much; his face looked as if whatever they served him was burned.

I danced, badly, with Ripotee clinging to my shoulders. We threw the whole line of dancers off.

Our guests from the flagship got up to leave rather early, seen out personally by their host and the beaming bride. Bob looked at me coolly, with an unbloodied eye—he'd had fast, first-rate treatment of the scratches and showed not a mark—and said, "If you ever grow up, Dee, you'll be welcome at home."

I laughed in his face.

He was trembling ever so slightly—with pure rage, I sincerely hoped. As he turned and started to steer Nita away with him in an

iron grip, she burst into tears and cried, "Oh, Dee, what will become of your life? My sister has turned into a naked savage—"

I was wearing my jumper, as a matter of fact, trimmed with bright patterns that a couple of Helen's junior wives had applied to the chest, back, and bottom. But I suppose Nita was still seeing me as I had burst from the ship that afternoon, bare and blood-spattered.

Other guests began leaving, hurried out by Helen's loud, laughing complaints that she was being ruined by two parties on successive nights.

She drew me over to the long table where she and Bob and Nita had feasted. Ripotee jumped down from my shoulder.

"I'm going off for a walk. Don't get worried about me this time. I'll meet you in the morning at the, ah, hole for fowl."

Helen called sharply after him, "Food will be left out for you. Please confine your eating to *cold* chicken."

She turned to me. "Here are your ship papers and your debt agreements. Netchkay paid his fine with your ship, since that was the only currency the port would accept; and I did a bit of dealing so that the ownership papers end in my hands—and now in yours."

I was pretty well bowled over by this; and I found that now that we had done it, diddled Bob and saved my neck, it wasn't going to be so simple just to accept my salvation at the hands of an old trading rival. I was suddenly worried about some hidden twist, some pitfall, in the already odd situation in which I had landed myself.

Into the awkward silence—awkward for me, though Helen was grinning triumphantly—came noise from an adjoining courtyard, where many of the guests seemed to have congregated on their way out. Singing, it was, and loud laughter.

"They are sitting on Barnabas," Helen said with relish.

"Helen, let him go work for Netchkay if that's what he wants. He's earned it."

"His just deserts!" She laughed. "White people are terrible to work for. Oh, yes, I worked for your aunt Juno once, on the computer records of the Steinway Line—making sure they were fit for the eyes of certain officials. I learned a lot working for Juno, but she would not learn much from me, or even about me—she was so surprised when I went my own way, to make my own fleet! Perhaps she thought I would spend my life as a faithful retainer!"

I took a deep breath. "Look, Helen, I like to hear about Aunt Juno, but things can't be left like this between you and me. You paid no bride wealth for me, and maybe I can't bring you any children to add

to your family, and I'll never learn local ways enough to be comfortable or to be a credit to you—"

Helen threw back her head and screamed with laughter. She slapped my arms, she hugged me. "Oh, you child you!" she crowed, dashing tears of mirth from her eyes. "Listen, you silly White girl; what do you think, we get married like that? A marriage is an alliance of families, planned long in advance. The bride comes and works for years first in the husband's house, so the husband's family can see is she worth marrying. We are not impulsive like you people, and we do not marry with chicken blood! But, that is what a man like Bob Netchkay would believe."

"Then I'm not—?"

"You are not. Nor am I so foolish as to marry a foreigner, bringing nothing but trouble and misunderstanding on all sides."

"But then it's all pure gift," I said, getting up from the table. "I can't accept, Helen—my freedom, my ship—"

"Sit down, sit, sit, sit," she said, pulling me back down beside her. "You forget, there are still the plans for the Steinway modifications, which are worth a great deal to me."

"Also I act in memory of certain debts to your aunt Juno; and because you are a woman and not a puny weed like that sister of yours; and to black the eye of my rival Netchkay in front of everyone; and also for the pleasure of doing a small something for a White girl, whose race was once so useful in helping my people to get up."

"But I could also say, Dee, that I hope to make you just enough beholden to me so that you will bend your pride—not much, only small-small—and a Steinway will fly her ship for me out there in space that she loves better than any world."

I leaned forward and made wet circles on the plastic table with the bottom of my glass. An image of Aunt Juno came into my mind—a plump dynamo of a woman with her hair piled high on her head to make her look taller; and pretty, pretty even after her neck thickened and obliterated her shapely little chin, and age began to freckle her hands. She had come tripping into my shop class in the Learning Center where I was raised, and batting her long lashes above a dazzling smile that left the teaching team charmed and humbled, she had summoned me away with her because she believed I could become a pilot.

Helen murmured, "Do you know, I myself never fly. All my dealings are made from here, from landfall. In Iboland it was taboo forever for women to climb up above the level of any man's head; it brought

sickness. Now we are bolder, we have discarded such notions, we climb easily to the top floors of tall buildings, and nobody falls ill. But I am old-fashioned, and I am still not comfortable climbing into black space among the stars."

I said, "I'll fly for you."

And so I have done ever since, with brief visits to my "family" on New Niger. I think sometimes how sharp Ripotee was to see that there was no living there for either of us. But I don't tell him; he thinks well enough of himself as it is.